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Argentina: Curbs on Civil Rights

Argentine President Videla may be forced to approve new legislation severely restricting citizens' civil rights.

One of Videla's close advisers has told the US ambassador that new laws of "revolutionary justice" will be announced shortly. These laws, he said, will allow the government to punish those "known to have committed crimes against the state, but against whom there is insufficient evidence."

The new legislation could pave the way for punishment of many of the political and labor figures regarded as subversive by members of the military government who favor a tougher line on dissidents. Such measures run counter to the moderation Videla has advocated. Passage of the new laws would be assured, as all lawmaking authority lies with the junta.

The hardliners regard Videla's approach as inadequate to deal with what they view as entrenched leftist terrorism, an undisciplined labor force, and irresponsible and corrupt politicians.

Some members of the military and the security services have apparently sought to embarrass and undermine the President by carrying out vigilante-style activities against known and suspected leftists. The most dramatic of these actions was last week's abduction and killing of four Uruguayan political exiles, two of whom were former congressmen.

Videla's adviser acknowledged that the President is having trouble with officers who want harsher measures, but insisted that the junta chief will be able to control them. Videla apparently hopes to temper the impact of the new law by releasing a number of political prisoners and announcing the names of those still under detention. If approved, however, the new law will be not only a concession to the hardliners but also an invitation to further demands.

President Videla

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